



My five cents...

A weekly column from Sen. Robert Nichols
by Sen. Robert Nichols, Senate District 3

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As Texas recovers from the destructive storms last week, the legislature is back at work and focused on finding answers to what happened last week. This week we also resumed work on the budget in the Senate Finance Committee. We heard from Article III agencies, including TEA and all of our institutes of higher education. To finish the week, we will hear from Article II agencies, including Health and Human Services Commission and the Department of State Health Services.

Here are five things happening around your state:

1. Six ERCOT board members resign

As of Thursday, six members of ERCOT's 16-member board announced they would resign Tuesday after massive blackouts affecting millions of Texans during disastrous winter weather left many without power in subfreezing temperatures for days. Five of the six board members that are resigning, including the chairwoman and the vice-chairman, live out-of-state, a fact that many Texans and legislators take issue with.

Several legislators have filed bills to ensure that all ERCOT board members are Texas residents. ERCOT manages the flow of electric power through the state's power grid. Weeks before the storm, ERCOT assured stakeholders that power plants were prepared for winter storms. It's obvious that was not the case, and as the vice-chair of the Senate Business and Commerce Committee, I look forward to getting answers from ERCOT, the PUC, power generators, and other industry professionals about what went wrong and how to prevent such a catastrophic failure in the future.

2. Governor calls meeting of legislators about electric billing

Over the weekend, Governor Abbott convened an emergency meeting of a group of legislators to discuss the spike in Texans' energy bills following the power outages across the state. As a member of that work group, I think it's important for Texans to know that this issue is a priority for all of us. We are working quickly and collaboratively in both chambers to address this issue. The system is complicated and assessing the total cost of these energy bills is ongoing. I look

forward to finding a solution to these issues and find ways the state can help mollify this extreme financial burden.

3. Vaccinations get back on track after winter storms

Distribution for the COVID-19 vaccine was disrupted last week due to the intense winter weather Texas faced. Six million doses nationwide, including 450,000 doses bound for Texas, were delayed due to deferred shipments, impassable road conditions, and power outages. However, vaccine providers are confident that Texas can rebound.

This week 1.5 million doses are set to arrive in the state, including last week's undelivered doses. This comes as vaccine makers told Congress that a big jump in delivery of doses is coming in the near future. By the end of March, Pfizer and Moderna expect to have provided the government with 220 million vaccines. Moreover, both companies expect to deliver 300 million doses each by the end of the summer and Johnson and Johnson assured they would provide 100 million of their vaccines.

4. PUC issues moratorium on utility disconnection for non-payment

In an emergency meeting, the Public Utility Commission issued an order halting utility disconnections for non-payment. These orders are directed at investor owned utilities that fall under the PUC's jurisdiction, including Oncor, AEP, CenterPoint, and TNMP. Importantly, they do not apply to municipally owned utilities or electric cooperatives.

This is welcome news as many Texas received high electric bills following the widespread power outages during the winter storms. Though many Texans are on fixed rate electricity contracts with their providers, those that are not are facing sky-rocketing bills. The PUC strongly urged retail electric providers to delay sending invoices out, especially to residential customers.

5. Students learning virtually will not have to take the STAAR test

Texas Education Commissioner Mike Morath announced that Texas students who are learning remotely this semester will not be required to take the annual STAAR test. The state logistically can't administer the test remotely, so those students can opt-out. However, students who are learning in-person will be taking the STAAR test, but without any of the stakes attached.

This year, the test is being used to gauge where students are at after a year of disrupted learning caused by the pandemic. There will be no accountability for school districts or campuses attached to the STAAR this year and it will not be used to evaluate whether or not students can or should progress to the next grade level.

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